the State of Tamil Nadu since as per information available with the Government, no evidence of coal reserves has so far been detected in the State. Therefore, the question of payment of royalty to the Government of Tamil Nadu for coal mining does not arise. However, a proposal for enhancement of the existing rate of royalty on lignite has been received from Government to Tamil Nadu and is under consideration of the Government.

Exploration and mining of coal by private sector companies

3456. SHRI ANANTA SETHI: Will the Minister of MINES AND MINERALS be pleased to state:

(a) whether Government have cleared the proposal to allow private sector companies into exploration and mining of coal and lignite;

(b) if so, which are the coal and lignite areas earmarked for private sector;

(c) the steps taken to amend the Coal Mines Nationalisation Act, 1973 for the purpose; and

(d) the details thereof?

THE MINISTER OF STATE IN THE MINISTRY OF MINES & MINERALS [DR. (SMT.) RITA VERMA]: (a) Yes, Sir.

(b) Earmarking of coal and lignite areas for the private sector has not yet been done by the Government.

(c) and (d) The Coal Mines (Nationalisation) Amendment Bill, 2000 proposes to induct a new provision in the Coal Mines (Nationalisation) Act, 1973 for non-captive coal and lignite mining as well as exploration of coal and lignite resources by the Indian companies.

Proposals to merge BALCO and NALCO

3457. SHRI ANANTA SETHI: Will the Minister of MINES AND MINERALS be pleased to state:

(a) whether Government have a proposal to merge Bharat Aluminium Company (BALCO) with the National Aluminium Company (NALCO);

(b) if so, the reasons for the merger of these two premier companies; and

(c) the steps taken in this regard?